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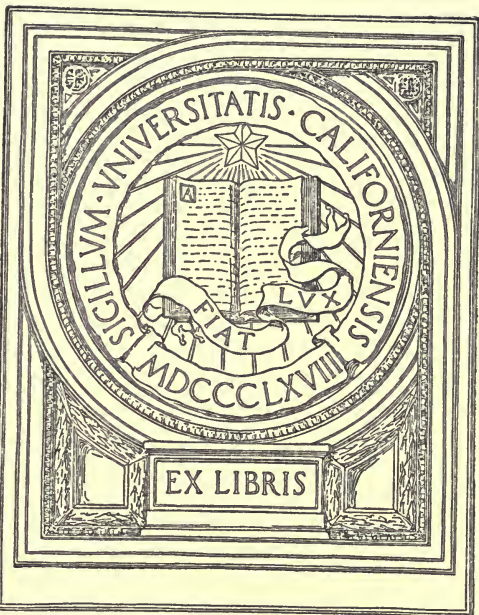
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[No. 277]

THE CRYING NEED OF A RENEWED CHRISTIANITY

BY

CHARLES W. ELIOT

PUBLISHED FOR FREE DISTRIBUTION

AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION

25 BEACON STREET, BOSTON

1953

THE AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION
WAS FOUNDED IN 1825 WITH THE
FOLLOWING EXPRESSED PURPOSE

“The object of the American Unitarian Association shall be to diffuse the knowledge and promote the interests of pure Christianity; and all Unitarian Christians shall be invited to unite and co-operate with it for that purpose.”

(The General Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches, passed the following vote at Saratoga, N. Y., in 1894.)

“These Churches accept the religion of Jesus holding, in accordance with his teaching, that practical religion is summed up in love to God and love to man.”

“The Conference recognizes the fact that its constituency is Congregational in tradition and polity. Therefore, it declares that nothing in this Constitution is to be construed as an authoritative test; and we cordially invite to our working fellowship any who, while differing from us in belief, are in general sympathy with our spirit and our practical aims.”

THE CRYING NEED OF A RENEWED CHRISTIANITY.

*An address delivered under the auspices of the Unitarian Churches
of Philadelphia, December 29, 1914.*

This meeting is held under the auspices of three Christian Churches of a peculiar sort, belonging to a small denomination called Unitarian,—peculiar in that they have no ecclesiastical organization in the ordinary sense, and also no creed or body of dogmas which members of such churches must accept, or are supposed to accept. Every church in this peculiar body is independent, and, like the church of the Plymouth Pilgrims, chooses its own minister, enters, if possible, into such fellowship as it pleases with other churches, and decides for itself upon the charitable, educational, and social work it proposes to carry on. The denomination stands for complete religious liberty, for a respectful attitude towards all sincere religious beliefs—Christian or other—and for judging every religion by the amount of genuine twentieth-century ethics which finds place in it. This peculiar church invites serious and candid people to unite, in the spirit of Jesus Christ, for the worship of God and the service of Man, but leaves entirely to the individual the decision whether he shall join a church or not. No rite bars the way into this church, no baptism, confirmation, or examination, and no one

enters it in hope of reward or out of fear of punishment.

The great churches of Christendom all possess powerful ecclesiastical organizations, and bodies of doctrine which are supposed to contain already the whole of essential religious truth, and to be unchangeable from age to age, except as the ecclesiastical bodies which govern the respective churches choose to make additions, or to issue new interpretations. All the great Christian churches have instituted rites, rituals, ceremonies, sacraments, and observances which they require their members to accept, attend, or perform, particularly those relating to birth, marriage, and death, the great events in every human life. The creeds and dogmas of these churches contain many conceptions which are not arrived at or deduced by any reasoning process, but are mere products of the human imagination which are accepted by a mysterious intuition or insight with which neither inductive nor deductive reasoning has anything to do. The Unitarian Churches reject irrational piety, while maintaining to the full wonder, reverence, and awe.

The period at which this meeting takes place, is, in many respects, the most awful and momentous in the history of the world. More than 300,000,000 of people are involved in the most cruel and savage War that has ever been waged,—a War in which the recently-won powers of Man over Nature are all turned with an administrative efficiency greater than the world has ever before seen, to the most active and

persistent destruction of life and property, of the capital laid up by the industry and frugality of many previous generations, and of the good will which had begun to develop between nation and nation. The War has demonstrated that, while mankind discovered and is using the marvellous new powers of light, heat, and electricity for purposes of immense beneficence, governments called Christian are capable of using these same powers, acquired for beneficent ends, in a manner which spreads death, desolation, and sorrow among 300,000,000 of the human race, availing themselves for these horrible purposes of some of the finest moral qualities which inhere in the helpless multitudes. Moreover, during fifty years past, Christian nations in Europe have given their best efforts to devising and storing up the means of making war in the most destructive manner and on an unprecedented scale. The present holocaust has been planned deliberately with the utmost intelligence and foresight, and is being carried on with terrible efficiency by the nation which is chiefly responsible for it — a Christian nation like all the other nations involved except Turkey and Japan. This is the immense moral catastrophe of these times. It has taken place in spite of much progress made within a hundred years past in many parts of the world in popular education, humane literature, and public liberty, and of a widespread, sympathetic desire on the part of the more fortunate men and women to serve and help the less fortunate.

In nineteen hundred years the Christian institutions of religion, in other words, the highly-organized churches of Christendom, have not only been unable to accomplish anything effectual towards preventing the frequent occurrence of war, but have often incited to war each its own nation or its own race, and have made hotter the patriotic fires which blaze up in war-time. Every ruler concerned with the present War calls upon God to give victory to his arms; every one of them believes, as firmly as David or Joshua or Saladin did, that the Lord is on his side; and each people is putting up eager prayers to its national God which cannot be granted without denying the equally fervent prayers which go up from its adversaries, and is giving thanks for victories for its side which are cruel defeats for the other. Moreover, there come from the churches to-day no effective influences towards peace, but only delusive consolations and vague wishes and petitions, the granting of which by the God to whom they are addressed would only perpetuate the present horrible state of Europe. Who could imagine that the chief teachings of the founder of the religion which these nations and churches profess were — love God and thy neighbor, and treat all men as brothers. Clearly neither nations nor churches have ever been truly Christian.

It is a fitting time, therefore, in which to seek the reasons for the inefficiency of the great Christian churches in promoting the moral and physical welfare of mankind on this earth, whatever they may claim to

do in respect to human happiness in another. The first explanation is that institutional Christianity departed early from the teachings of the founder of the religion, and copied in its structure the authoritative and hierarchical arrangements, and in its doctrine the materialism of the Roman world. There emerged from the early centuries after Christ two despotic churches, each of which undertook to rule the minds and hearts of men, and did rule for many centuries and masses of the European peoples. The Protestant Reformation made a serious breach in the Roman Church, and brought in some new liberty — civil as well as religious — but Protestantism remained a highly authoritative religion; for within well-organized Protestant denominations the authority of the inspired Bible replaced for the common people the authority of the Roman hierarchy, the authoritative interpretation of the Bible being supplied by small groups of men learned in the theology of the times. Not till the Pilgrims set up in Plymouth their Free Church in their Free State, did the Christian world contain a fairly successful example of instituted civil and religious liberty. The Pilgrim Church and State set up standards of which America, at least, has never lost sight; but within seventy-five years many of the Pilgrims' liberties were lost or impaired; so that the compact signed in the cabin of the Mayflower, and John Robinson's doctrine that more light and truth were still to break forth from God's Word, became little more than a precious and fragrant memory.

The first explanation, then, of the impotency of the Christian churches as regards the prevention of war is that they were all organized with too much authority and too little liberty in them. They never believed in God's way of developing the best and most effective human character—the way of liberty to sin, in order to the development of self-control. The Christian ascetics avoided fleshly temptation by mortifying the flesh; the monks and nuns fled from the world altogether. The first duties of the common people in religion were obedience to the priest and the observance of the rites the priest prescribed. Men and women should be compelled to believe whatever the Church dictated, and should be held to the authorized beliefs and practices of the church by custom, tradition, and hallowed associations. The churches have not relied on the essential dignity of human nature and the human love of freedom for the uplifting of the race, but, on the contrary, on man's tendency to sin and his fear of the consequences, and on his too-frequent degradation in this world and his hope of salvation in another,—a salvation obtainable only through the vicegerents of God on earth. Not believing in liberty, the churches have habitually supported autocratic government, and that climax of autocracy—military discipline for purposes of conquest.

The second explanation of the impotency of the Christian churches to prevent war, or promote peace, is to be found in the unethical quality of some of the doctrines of the Christian churches, as crystallized in their dogmas and creeds. The official creeds of the

great churches of Christianity, and many parts of the Scriptures contain conceptions of God's nature and of His action toward the human race which are intolerable to the ethical mind of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The creeds of the evangelical churches are, as a rule, built on the "fall of man" as described in the story of the Garden of Eden, the absolute correctness or trustworthiness of the story itself being assumed on the ground that its author was inspired by God himself. The conduct attributed to God in that story would be wholly unworthy of any man whose standards of conduct accorded with the average sentiments about right and wrong of civilized people to-day. God in that story is unjust, mean, and cruel; yet the story, taken as a narrative of facts, has been made the foundation of the official creeds of all the great Christian churches.

Man fell from a superior state of innocency into a condition of sin and misery. Nevertheless, he peopled the earth with creatures like himself, degraded and wretched. But this result was unsatisfactory even to barbarous ages, when considered as the work of God, and means of redemption and ultimate salvation had to be devised and formulated. Hence came the practice of propitiation or expiation by sacrifices — human sacrifices at first in Israel, but later burnt offerings of beasts and birds; and finally the Christian church discovered in the scriptures a vicarious atonement for the sins of the world by the Son of God, incarnated for a brief residence on this atom of an earth, in this insignificant solar system among the

countless myriads of celestial bodies. The Lamb of God was sacrificed for the sins of the world; and so some small proportion of the human race was rescued from eternal torment to justify by their eternal happiness, so far as they might, the original creation of a feeble race tricked into sin. The creeds of the great churches differ as to the proportion of the race really rescued by the vicarious atonement through Jesus Christ; but they all agree in making this vicarious atonement necessary to the salvation of any proportion of the human race.

In these days, the whole conception of one being—human or divine—suffering, though innocent, for the sins of another, or of innumerable others, is revolting to the universal sense of justice and fair dealing. No family, no school, and no court would venture to punish the innocent, when the guilty were known, in order that the guilty might escape punishment. Any human father would be outraged by the suggestion that he had ever dealt, or could so deal with his children; and yet every member of the great Christian churches is supposed to believe that God deals in that way with the human race; and that the victim offered up for the redemption of a portion of the human race was, in a peculiar sense, the son of God. How incredible it is, that the religious institutions and doctrines, which resulted from the perversions of the real teachings of Jesus by the pagan world, should have been so completely and fundamentally inconsistent with the ethics of those teachings!

Before the Christian churches can be expected to

be efficient in the promotion of human welfare, and particularly in the bringing of peace on earth, they must purge themselves of such doctrines as these. It is not enough to say in defense of the churches that many church members in good standing no longer believe these shocking doctrines; they should be eliminated from the published standards and confessions of the churches.

The historical Christian churches were early made partners with empires, monarchies, and baronies, in the control and oppression of the masses of mankind, and, the governments being maintained by force, the churches became, in general, supporters of the military régime. This was natural enough, because the God of the Christian churches, like Israel's God, was commonly thought of as Lord of Hosts, God of Battles, Successful Invader, and Glorious Conqueror. These martial attributes of God were described with glowing fervor in the litanies, ascriptions, and thanksgivings of the churches. Joshua's God was the most ruthless of destroyers. Not so destructive, however, as the German Emperor's God to-day; because he evidently lacked the power to destroy everything that he wished to destroy: "And the Lord was with Judah; and he drave out the inhabitants of the mountain, but could not drive out the inhabitants of the valley, because they had chariots of iron." Some of the Canaanites successfully resisted the Lord of the Israelite hosts; but in these later days the Belgians could not successfully resist the Lord of the German hosts. This conception of God is hideous, cruel, and

insane; and no Christian church which tolerates it can be efficient in the promotion of human welfare and happiness.

Not only is the God of the great Christian churches often a War God, but the Christian life itself is often represented in Christian hymn and preachings as a battle. The Christian fights against Satan and the powers of evil,—he goes forth to war against the evils and wrongs of his day: “The Son of God goes forth to war, a kingly crown to gain”—meanest of motives. The saint wears armor, the armor of the mediaeval battle-field, and the archangels and the knights set upon the dragons and fiends, and slay them with swords. A large part of the imagery of Christian literature is drawn from the work of soldiers and armies. “Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war” is to-day one of the favorite hymns of the Protestant churches. In the annual procession of the Corpus Christi in Vienna, three bodies take common part, each with great magnificence,—the court, the army, and the church. This is the habitual association which has gradually undermined the capacity of the Church to advance in modern Europe the cause of justice, mercy, and liberty, and hence of peace and good-will.

The Christian nations have, however, attained since the middle ages to a civilization which seems to modern men in Christian lands higher than that of the non-Christian nations, except in the prevalence of international war and fighting in general. For at least six hundred years the Christian nations have fought

oftener and harder than the so-called heathen. Within the past two centuries all the great wars have been fought on Christian soil by Christian soldiers. This recognized superiority in general civilization, however, is not chiefly due to the churches, but to other influences. The chief beneficial result of the Crusades was a remarkable development of Mediterranean commerce between the East and the West. The period which we call the Renaissance was the period of a remarkable revival of classical learning, and particularly of the Greek literature. The discovery of America brought about an immense increase of commercial adventure and of Occidental wealth; while the religious enthusiasm which accompanied the discovery was the source of hideous cruelties and barbarities. The Reformation was not a normal product of the Roman Church but a rebellion and schism within that church, one consequence of which was an increase of civil and religious liberty in Europe. In the eighteenth century began the great series of scientific discoveries due to the adoption and successful use of the inductive philosophy and method; and for the last one hundred and fifty years it has been natural and physical science which has been the main contributor to the increasing material welfare of mankind. Science has won its way in spite of the opposition of the principal Christian churches; and that opposition did not cease until within the memory of men now living; indeed, it still breaks out from time to time. And now, within the last five months, the worst War of all recorded time,—worst because of its wide extent, the fury with which

it is prosecuted, and the destructive power of its new implements, — brings unheard-of-misery upon the human race; and the Christian churches are helpless to prevent it, or even to mitigate its horrors. The effective organizations for such pitifully small relief as can be given are for the most part not religious but secular. The care of the wounded falls on men and women trained in natural and physical science, and possessing manual skill and the spirit of service. The effective works of mercy are performed not chiefly by representatives of the churches or by religious partisans and zealots, but by men and women who understand how to get food to the starving, to bring first-aid to the wounded and carry them quickly to hospitals, to prevent fevers and infections, to purify water supplies, and to treat lock-jaw, gangrene, and frostbite. The effective advocates of peace and goodwill among men in this horrible convulsion, produced by a nation which believes in discipline, ruthless force, and the domination of the strong over the weak, are not the priests and ministers of traditional Christianity, or the performers of rites and ceremonies, but the teachers of public liberty as the indispensable source of the highest efficiency in individual or nation, and of public justice and righteousness developed under free governmental institutions which train men to self-control in freedom under law.

The great European War is fundamentally a conflict between freedom and democracy on the one side, and the rule of hereditary monarchs and a military class on the other, that rule being maintained by

appeals to love of country and national pride, and enforced by a stern discipline which leaves nothing of liberty to the individual. In this strife the Christian Church as a whole is divided, each national church supporting its own nation; and by inheritance and tradition each national church supports the war-making power, no matter how cruel, deceitful, and faithless that power may prove to be. In short, the established and conventional churches manifest little power to promote either love to God or love to the neighbor.

Is this ineffective condition the final issue of the teachings of Jesus Christ, or is it only the result of the structure of the institutions, and the quality of the doctrines in which those teachings have been embodied and set forth? To this question a great many men in all the nations of Europe and America reply that such a discussion has no interest for them; that they have not only rejected the traditional dogmas of established Christianity, but that they have no interest in discussing them; that the vital movements of the human spirit have taken more promising directions; and that they are concerned not with the Christian churches, but with the new powers which make for liberty, enlightenment, and progress. Multitudes of these men say that they are ready for any sort of social service; and at this moment multitudes of them in France and England are showing by their voluntary acts that they are ready to suffer and die in the cause of freedom; while other multitudes, equal in number, permit themselves to be driven to wounds and death

in the cause of effective discipline, force, and domination. On both sides, millions of men are exhibiting extraordinary self-sacrifice and devotion, natural fruits of the spirit of Jesus Christ; but most of these heroes have not consciously derived these lofty sentiments from the Christian churches, but are moved by the common loves of family, home, and country.

For two generations the men that have been doing, and are now doing the work of the world have, in large measure, withdrawn from the organized churches, or maintain but a nominal connection with them,—a connection, however, which often includes considerable payments to the churches on behalf of their wives and children. Educated men as a rule, in both Europe and America, have ceased to be influenced in their opinions or their actions by the dogmas of the churches, by the rewards churches offer, or by the punishments they threaten. Sunday has become a day for physical rest, for outdoor refreshment, for attention to the family, or for the enjoyment of music,—sometimes at the church, but oftener at the club, the park, or the concert hall. With trifling exceptions, the church is no longer the centre of social recognition, or of social enjoyments for the multitude. The granges and trades-unions, the neighborhood houses, and the numerous beneficial societies provide in many communities the needed opportunities for social intercourse which church meetings used to provide. In former times the Christian churches were the almoners for the poor and desolate; and the chief works of mercy were carried on by men and

women especially commissioned by the Christian Church. Now, secular societies, administered by laymen, carry on many of the principal movements for the improvement of society,—such as the Civil Service Reform Leagues, the Playground Association, the Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations, and the Associations for Baby, School, Social, and Mental Hygiene; and many of the hospitals, dispensaries, and asylums, whether supported by taxation or by the voluntary contributions of public, spirited persons, are the works of people whose motive-power is not derived from churches. To be sure, many churches have, of late, taken up some kinds of social work; but in such labors the churches are as a rule less effective than the lay societies. Even in its function of teaching children what religion is, what right conduct is, and what the motives are which lead to right conduct, the Church has much to learn. The Sunday School does not compare favorably in method or results with the week-day school, even as a teacher of elementary ethics; for it often lacks sound methods, adequate time, and the support of parents.

The fundamental trouble is that the Christian churches, as instituted and organized, have relied for centuries on imposed beliefs, rites, sacraments, symbols, and observances. Since the latter years of the eighteenth century, it has become more and more difficult to impose beliefs on educated people; and intelligent men have steadily lost faith in mysticism-symbolism, and sacerdotalism, and have come to rely more and more on the careful ascertainment of facts,

the human reason, and the natural sentiments of reverence and love. They have also come to prefer for themselves and their families liberty, independence, and public order founded on agreed-upon law, to obedience, submission, and order founded on discipline administered to the many by the few. With these new tendencies of the human spirit the great Christian churches are not in full accord.

The great Christian churches have always supported the claim of absolute monarchs that they rule by Divine right; but in the modern world only ignorant or archaic persons accept that doctrine. The mystic has always believed that in some unimaginable way he is the recipient, on occasion, of direct revelations from God through faculties or means of perception in himself which are instinctive rather than reasonable; but the advance in man's knowledge of nature, and in his power to apply to his own uses the natural forces, has made it harder than it used to be for an intelligent man to be a mystic. The thinking person who is enduring a life of suffering now, on this earth, is much less disposed than he used to be to accept as a real consolation another imagined life free from the struggles and pains of the present life. In other words, the consolations and hopes which the Christian churches have heretofore imparted to suffering human beings are to-day far less efficacious than they were in the first eighteen centuries. Neither the heaven nor the hell of the Christian churches appeals to the modern man as it formerly did to his predecessors.

The condition of Europe at this moment is the last and most convincing demonstration that the great churches of Christendom have lost their power to keep Man from sin, to guide him on an upward path, and to make him happy ; for the churches are helpless in the presence of this terrible mass of long-planned, elaborately contrived human sin, shame, and suffering, although the mass is shot through by splendid gleams of courage, self-sacrifice, and patriotic devotion.

The religious state of Christendom to-day is therefore in need of a genuine revival. Mankind needs to worship, needs incitements to love, reverence, and duty, and a happy spiritual conception of the universe. Without these helps, Man cannot possibly be happy in his family, his labor, or his social order. Without these conceptions of the finite and the infinite values, Man cannot rise in his nature or his life from bad to good, and from good to better. No single personality born in Christendom—and no class of persons—can reach his best without accepting as his guides in life the fundamental teachings of Jesus Christ,—love God and the neighbor, have compassion on the wronged and the desolate, seek the truth that frees, and worship God in spirit and in truth. To live in this way, it is not necessary to accept any of the dogmas of the great churches, or any part of their symbolism or ritualism. Indeed, much of their symbolism, ritualism, dogmatism and ecclesiasticism is inconsistent with essential obedience to the precepts of Jesus Christ.

What then is the renewed Christianity which these

terrible times we are living in cry out for in the midst of tears and heart-breaking sorrows? It is a Christianity which abandons the errors and the unjust, cruel conceptions which the centuries have piled up on the simple teachings of Jesus. It is a Christianity which sympathizes with and supports the aspirations of mankind for freedom,—freedom in thought, speech and action,—and completely abandons authoritative ecclesiasticism and governmental despotism. It is a Christianity which hallows and consecrates birth, marriage, the bringing up of children, family life, the earning of the livelihood, and death, and rejects all the aspersions on the natural life of Man which Christianity inherited from paganism and Judaism. It is a Christianity which will be the friend and ally of all that is good and ennobling in literature-science, and art, and will avail itself without fear of all the new means of teaching and helping men which successive generations shall discover, and of all the innocent enjoyments and social pleasures, while resisting effectively every unwholesome or degrading influence on human society. It is a Christianity which will recognize that the pursuit of happiness in this world is legitimate for every human being, and that the main function of government is to protect and further men in that pursuit by securing to the community health, education, wholesome productive labor, and liberty.

Do you ask if there exist in the world any exemplars of this sort of Christianity? Fortunately for the future of the world, there are to be found in

nearly every Christian communion individuals who illustrate in their personal lives the purity and power of the simple religion taught by Jesus Christ. Many of these persons are quite unconscious of the embarrassments which the creeds, rituals, dogmas, and discipline of their respective churches would inflict on their candid minds, if they realized, or apprehended in clear and logical statements, the meaning of the traditional doctrines and rites of their churches. Finding themselves practically free to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God, they remain in the churches into which they were born, held there by family ties, sweet associations, or conservative sentiment, and inattentive to the inconsistencies between their life of the spirit and the historical doctrines of the churches to which they belong. They are all exemplars of the renewed Christianity of which there is such crying need; and many of them are active promoters of that renewal.

The liberal churches of Protestantism are, however, the best exemplars of renewed Christianity; because they have definitely abandoned the official creeds and dogmas of the past, all ecclesiasticism, and almost all symbolism and ritualism. Their membership, modest in number and little disposed to proselytism, consists exclusively of persons who propose to be free, simple, and candid in their religious thought, and in all expressions of that thought. These independent churches lay the emphasis on character and conduct, and are concerned with the tendencies and practices

of their members in daily action, rather than with the beliefs of their fellowship.

After all, true Christianity is not a body of doctrines, or an official organization to conduct and control men's minds and wills. It is a way of life.

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